Discovering Benefits

Online Resources

- Learned about benefits from a facebook group
- Looked at third party orgs that were recommended by Disabled American Veterans Association
- Found Reddit forum helpful for more information
- Reddit forum suggested other resources, including with all that paperwork, private and public
- Veteran initiated search for information about which documentation evidence were needed to update disability rating
- Reddit helps other veterans find information on benefits opportunities
- Veteran finds that many other veterans don't know that they are eligible for benefits, or that they even exist.
- Shares that she has seen ads on the news and facebook for lawyers who claim to help veterans get their benefits, but never looked into it
- Researching benefits "it's there to be a awful stress because you don't know what's good information and what's not"
- Veteran found VA research resources on reddit forum
- "Google most helpful thing was the reddit forum"
- Reddit users don't have an "ulterior motive"
- You can ask a question on reddit and know that someone will answer
- "Lobbyists is also there" in reddit forum and connecting veterans w each other and with the right services"

Word of Mouth

- Said the hunt about medical benefits from another veteran friend and so "turned the DD214 of my day on most days on Linkedin evangelizing for these Veteran benefit groups"
- "I'm tired of this cycle of people having to learn the hard way"
- Spoke to another veteran and that is how he found out he'd be eligible for Dental.
- "Somebody told me that I should be looking into the VA"
- Military friends always encouraged to use the VA medical facilities
- Found out about benefits after experiencing health issues and being in emotional failures in VA hospitals, that is how she became involved in the system
- Someone at his wife's job told her about a lady that was having problems at her house with the VA and start applying for benefits, shared her phone number

General Awareness

- WWII vet had no idea he was able to get benefits
- "I don't know of other benefits I would use, you know I guess I don't know what else is out there."
- Veteran didn't know she received a sibling with someone told her at an appointment never got a letter about it.
- "There's really no other benefits that I know of that I could take advantage of"
- Discovered benefits 12 years after leaving active duty
- "There's an information gap." Veterans don't understand what they're eligible for
- Didn't recognize disability compensation as a benefit
- "If I would have known there were other steps, ... things could have been a lot easier. I'm having to do all of this when I was a really really sick person"
- "I wonder if somebody would have told me in the beginning, these few healthy years I could have been working and getting in the system, but I didn't know they existed"
- If I had known sooner that I could get benefits, I would have starting applying for the treatments a lot sooner
- Found out about benefits 30-40 years later

VA

- Discovered benefits through being medically retired
- "very fortunate there was an online process to get the benefits I needed and I reviewed. I was pushed through a tunnel if you will"
- Found out about the VA after he got out, "counselor referred me over"
- That rep went over everything that he could qualify for
- Found out about the VA after he got out, "counselor referred me over" He had a counselor who followed him ~6 months post separation and made doc appts for him, etc
- Found VA group, they told him he's service connected and having a back injury while serving in 2010
- Veteran finds that many other veterans don't know that they are eligible for benefits, or that they even exist.

Processing Time

General Descriptions

- The first disability claim I filed took about 1 year 3 months before I found out the outcome.
- Took about a year for the claim to actually work its way
- The separate look about 2 years. The VA's central office in Washington is working on that process, so it should be shorter in the future.
- Took three years to figure out about the healthcare benefits.
- Separated in March, went to the VA in July, it took him around for claim process
- Some veterans this interviewed had been processing a claim for 10+ years
- Entire process took 5 years, "I'm still waiting" rating (2016-2021)
- "It took four months just to get the initial documentation to provide documentation that I did need.
- My record claims went more quickly, partly because I worked in the building with the people processing claims.
- The separate look about 2 years. The VA's central office in Washington is working on that process, so it should be shorter in the future.
- Took about 8-12 months from meeting with DAV to getting a decision letter about disability.
- Took about 7-8 months to get healthcare.
- Applied for VA health care 2010 - eligibility process took 2-3 months.
- "It took over 3 years to get my rating for something I was medically retired for in the military."
- Applied for VA health care 2010 - eligibility process took 2-3 months.
- Enrollment process took ~2 months
- First in-take appointment, "in this case, was a year out"

Missed Benefits

- Veteran tried applying to life insurance, but was not approved because he was ineligible after leaving the military.
- Called VA to find if he was eligible for education benefits, but was informed that they had expired (!!)
- "Around '92-'93, the world finally started using computers and the internet and trying to help us. By that time, the 10 year limit on the GI Bill education benefits was over. So I missed those. They should have given us those benefits for life. They just haven't changed that."

Mindset

- "Seems kinda standard issue, so I wasn't surprised by it."
- How was the year when starting to get health in, "I bet you had 10 different providers I had to see, some were far away from my house, I'd ride rides from where I live"
- "Overall the VA has a good program to help people, but it's slow and it's complicated, and you have to be willing to persist and be willing to endure just don't fool with the VA"
- "They'll send you a letter for an appointment a month from now. It's not timely"
- "Waiting on entire year for your initial appointment is a very long time—it's a very, very long time"
- Waiting to hear back felt like "a little bit of anxiety"
- Timeliness could be shorter 'long wait times.
- During the waiting period, you just wait and hope they haven't lost your paperwork and it's still being processed.
- If you need more information, tell the Veteran to go do something else and if there's enough information, it should only take 1-2 weeks to make a decision. They need to clean that up, big time.
- It isn't easy waiting 5-6 years for the VA to approve something

VSOs

General

- Veteran received support from VSO during application process "wonderful support"
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- Veterans is currently part of a few VSOs
- Disabled American Veterans helped get his disability rating increased: "they got some magic"
- "There is huge business in veteran representation and advice duty service members get benefits from the VA"
- He is trading to help other veterans through the enrollment process
- Talked to DVA person who helped him a lot
- "It made me feel better about the process because I didn't know the process"
- Was charged a fee to get healthcare (charged the difference for 3 months worth of payments)
- Used third party that put together paper work
- Describes Research process for eligibility: went through the DAV
- Veteran has worked with the DAV.
- Since leaving active duty, Veteran learns more about benefits through friends and VSOs
- Doesn't trusted his VSOs, yet because "previously I was too overwhelmed to do anything extra"
- The most important thing WWP does is letting us know we exist / was eligible for"
- Every Friday DAV does legislative webinar to get updated on latest laws and bills in the house / senate
- Lively went through DAV to apply for disability; I did the GI bill on my own. Also got enrolled in VRE on my own.
- about working with DAV: "It was always recommended, kind of like doing my taxes, I'm never going to do it myself"
- "VSO kept us updated, but they also kept pushing the paper work. They took over the phone calls, we just signed the paper work. They did everything for us, everyone. They were so helpful."
- VSO: WWP: "they were very helpful"
- Feel confident with benefits eligibility since working with VSO "because they only represent what was eligible for"
- She has an assigned social worker who shared a list "this is what you can qualify for"
- "I don't even have to words to explain all they've done for us"
- "independence project" within WWP
- VSO was able to follow the paperwork inside the VA
- Confidence level fluctuated: "It wasn't until I started working with the VSO and someone else was helping us fight the good fight that our confidence level rose."
- snap fingers: Knowing about the VSO earlier
- Found out about VSOs through another veteran who was there struggling at the VA.
- DAV has created a community of support
- 2008 came home from Iraq: lost ~small percentage of hearing, applied for a VTA. DAV and American legion: "other veteran approached him and asked if he would lead it."
- DAV does a great job of providing services, the "wishes," "best resources in my opinion, it's better than the rest"
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- DAV does a great job of providing services, the "wishes," "best resources in my opinion, it's better than the rest"
- Joined VFW & American legion! upon coming home from Iraq, they didn't do much.
- Member of American legion!
- Having VSOs in each VA facility can help veterans navigate the process
- Best way for Veterans to get enrolled in VA health care: Veterans Service Office, a place to come to VSOs.
- Was one of the women Veterans interviewed through years of dealing with the VA, and our hands are tied by the rules of the VA. Hands are tied.
- Veteran takes other veterans to appointments.
- Without a VSO or advocate to help go through, it can be very challenging.
- Rep this several veterans who try to avoid themselves and file their own claims but then they hit road blocks
- Filed for disability with the help of a VSO before he separated
- VSO was a 'wealth of knowledge'
- Didn't connect with VA staff, worked through VSO
- Worked with VSO through the application process

Communication from the VA

Descriptions

- Communicated w/ VA via mail and in person, but would have preferred to use a phone, easier to reach people by phone
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- Received letter in the mail after reevaluation saying he was approved
- Husband gets notices from VA and she is how they learn about benefits
- Had to call the office a lot to find out the status, it's the time, the VA didn't have a system for returning/ratching/ updating — could take a year
- They would come back to me all the time asking for more information.
- Advocate called him weekly to make sure everything was okay and asked him if he didn't deposit what he got out
- Veteran get info from friends, from programs, new services, discount services
- After first rating veterans receive a letter explaining what benefits they qualify for, "I participated never received
- Once he received his full rating, the VA sent more information about benefits
- "Administrative are being dumped on the veterans"
- "We have gone into collections, as the VA was supposed to pay bills, but they didn't pay it"
- "When it goes on their credit report, it's affecting their credit"
- Describes communicating with the VA would be a huge struggle as a normal veteran
- There is a phone number you can call, but I called twice in the same day, asked the exact same question and each time I got two different answers. That doesn't give me confidence.
- During this time Veteran claimed one piece of comms: ~mail, participant says VA never followed up.
- Mailed checks were not clear - you had to log in to see history of payments and what they were for / etc.
- VRE counselors changes and veteran's to not notified "little times I had a meeting scheduled, and they didn't show up for the meeting"
- Most difficult / frustrating: "we couldn't get the same answer twice" "It was like nobody knew what the other person was doing. It was very, very frustrating."
- "They would get these claim letters, and it was always very complicated when you tried to pay attention to what the claim's digit register or something and you'd get rate notices"

Interactions with the VA

Positive

- "I which in my experience Veterans Affairs Office, Every time I call the VA Ed office, ... I'm not on hold for long and I'm talking to a person they're always friendly, and they always give me the information I need / want. ... Everything has been very patient and answered my questions."
- Local medical office is good but you have to follow up to get the care
- Helpful VA staff: "everyone I've met was a few nice people, but the Houston VA was not the atmosphere that we needed."
- Local VA hospital is helpful and nice, staff is helpful and nice.
- VA Business Office helped with paperwork for health benefits
- Had an advocate within the VA who helped him schedule
- When asked what was the most helpful thing the Veteran physic: "Claim process online is really easy"
- Overall, calling the VA for healthcare has been pretty good. Scheduling service is slower than it used to, but pretty good overall.
- Second claimanter was very helpful and helped the Veteran physic: "Claim process online is really easy"

Negative

- Veteran describes process as having to write back and forth "you could do it online and see why I wrote."
- Called VA hospital after separate, "not a very pleasant experience.
- Called VA hospital after separate, "not a very pleasant experience.
- Veteran carries a rolling briefcase of documents.
- "I was told to go to eligibility, but there were no signs"
- "It was frustrating in trying to communicate with the VA, and you would call the VA and they would say, "I'm sorry, I accept get somebody ..."
- Talking about calling the VA: "You know, anything to promise you to get you off the phone."
- Veteran's initial on building the process: "I'm not sure and they closed without seeing her, and without offering to see her / fix it
- "It was very complicated, I'm a pretty smart guy, I'm a pretty smart guy, I'm capable to gather the documentation to support your claim, I think that would be a problem"
- "I went back, and it still wasn't enough, and I'm certainly didn't make you feel welcome at all there."
- "Giving you all the information you need to know WWII vet's to VA trying to get him benefit
- "It's not easy to go to an office and say I want to have a VSO or at least another veteran who has been in the system for a while to help you navigate the system"
- "Business offices are not deep environment."
- "Paperwork got messed up"
- Saw a lot of people who "seemed like they were lost and were frustrated"
- "VA Employees have so much information, through to put in consults or ask questions or get answers"
- Describes business office as "business closed doors"
- Veteran carries a rolling briefcase of documents.
- Sales people pushing for "everything under the sun" / made promises that aren't true"
- "Office office was full, couldn't service more people. ~a option call ahead or make appointment.
- Experience with the staff was "didn't surprise a lot"
- Experience with the staff was "didn't surprise a lot"
- Saw a lot of people who "seemed like they were lost and were frustrated"
- Describes business office as "business closed doors"
- Offices inconsistent with "sometimes, I'd go to another office to take care of billing. Frustrating.
- Paperwork is over whelming
- "What do you need in order for me to be able to break the Business Office"
- "It's not easy to go in and say I want to have a VSO or at least another veteran who has been in the system for a while to help you navigate the system"
- "It's not easy to go in and say I want to have a VSO or at least another veteran who has been in the system for a while to help you navigate the system"
- Physical buildings were difficult to navigate: ~no map, seems spread out.
- Brought Veteran friend with him to show him grounds of new local VA office: "I would be very grateful if someone would bored new going on their own, without someone to show him around, because everyone was very nice and welcoming
- "My counselor ghosted me"
- Veteran shares frustrations with the VA: "You have to walk specific line to get what you need."
- Veteran says that experience seems to be dependent on "luck" - good luck, if lost you "might as well hang up and call back".
- VRE - consistency in backing forms need to be looked at by not human / refilled / automated
- Veteran found out about the insurance after becoming 100% pot - missed it by just a few months
- If Alderwitts site is down, then VA website isn't super helpful.
- Dealing with post 9/11 GI school stuff has been biggest frustration.
- When asked what was the most frustrating part of the process the Veteran physic: "Anything that triggered social anxiety to deal with so many people"
- The Veteran shares that it is "hard to walk into VA office as a woman"
- Inconsistent experience between VA offices before and after moving.
- Veteran describes her local VA and Texas based VA locations prior to separation as "difficult to get information on benefits. Experience was inconsistent, she had issues at other locations.
- The Veteran shares that it is "hard to walk into VA office as a woman"
- "Disorienting at first, because they were the youngest person there by the 20 years"
- Veteran says they did not get much help or information for those with voluntary separation.
- Veteran seems annoyed and disappointed that they're missing information
- Schools bills would be sent late / send the wrong amount
- Describes process as "I'm not sure how it's supposed to work, but it would smoothly transfer as she moved states, but it did not.
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- If Alderwitts site is down, then VA website isn't super helpful.
- Inefficiencies "having to wait for a form to transfer things" ie: this position is one deep, and they're now
- When Veteran got out of the service, she went to the VA hospital, learned about eligible benefits. "Nice of someone to tell me"
- Describes process as "I'm not sure how it's supposed to work, but it would smoothly transfer as she moved states, but it did not.
- Father's first appointment was "very, very long time" and turned into right off in the clinic"
- "We had to be at the VA at 8am to walk in this day, have to see this one guy"
- Dealing with post 9/11 GI school stuff has been biggest frustration.
- VA staff interactions: "Veterans" vs. "representatives" ai/ quotes, grumpy old veterans that didn't realize woman was in the military too"
- What was Frustrating about the process: "Just the interactions, I truly felt like was begging for my life, and I'm not a patient. It was a very difficult process. ... I read transcripts ... I'd get better when I get the 500."
- Describes process as "I'm not sure how it's supposed to work, but it would smoothly transfer as she moved states, but it did not.
- "To get rating she had to "constantly go back and forth, it was kind of a mess"
- Most difficult / frustrating: "we couldn't get the same answer twice" "It was like nobody knew what the other person was doing. It was very, very frustrating."
- "It was very disappointing"
- Pickup up on overwhelmed "one person, and 30 other people, or long wait times, and I'm sitting there with a lot of work prior to you"
- "Trying to get our residential address changed took hours and hours. The ones who are not well organized, so there was a lot of waiting and not being told what to do.
- A changes with every organization or department you work with
- Even when Veterans are "trying to do the right things" in your lane "Trying to get a lot of stuff done, trying to get to speak to overwhelmed.
- It seems like there's a lot of people using these services. A about feels like "we're just a number" but the guys were angry about it so I decided it wasn't worth it.
- Most Frustrating thing: getting VA to understand his experience since he was a medic in Iraq and claims that were denied. Getting smaller disability claims approved and doctor thought was excessive
- "Trying to get our residential address changed took hours and hours. The ones who are not well organized, so there was a lot of waiting and not being told what to do.
- Years ago, when I first got out, went to the VA (DC) not dirtied and asked "what do I need to do?" But the guys were angry about it so I decided it wasn't worth it.
- "The waiting experience was bad—they didn't tell you you had to take a number, they just kept calling what Great they were on.
- Veteran shares it was frustrating to go into the VA and learn there.

Out-Processing

Positive Experience

- Veteran found out about VA benefits through transitioning class (mandatory military duty - called "SOTA" Veteran found "SOTA to be helpful
- "A week class that went over the whole alleviation website"

Negative Experience

- Learned about VA benefits through Veterans Service Officer / Transitioning, decided to become familiar with the VA - they don't teach you about the VA, just how important it is"
- "even though I had been through the process, it was still overwhelming, I had to sit down and read it carefully"
- "I knew very little about benefits until the very end, and I was in the military for 22 years"
- Didn't have a good experience transitioning, "I didn't want anything to do with them"
- "My VA would have been a lot more of a benefit if I had the VA Office offering us benefits in the 90s rather than the mid 2000s"
- "I blame that on the Department of Defense, they don't teach you how to do what they put out that you only had 10 years to use your benefits"
- "Underpowered" was very frequent theme, "Veterans seemed that they didn't really care
- Military did not share details about VA home loan.
- When separated she didn't learn about benefits "not at all"
- Describes process of leaving as "went through medical board, when the medical board finished, I was like okay, bye-bye"
- No TAPS classes - no out-processing
- I understand that now all the services have counselors who help veterans, but back in my day it took three counselors to talk to every outgoing military person.
- No communications nor counselors for military exit to educate on VA
- Got back from Vietnam, no one told him about the VA
- Veteran describes TAPS as "rushed" and as a screwdriver to a spacewrap" "TAPS is a rushed process where other veteran and already had a job lined up, or someone involuntarily separated
- Veteran describes TAPS as "rushed" and as a screwdriver to a spacewrap"

Neutral Experience

- I learnt about filing for disability benefits ... I was told kind of off and on throughout the year by people who were ahead of me in the process, or people who were more acquainted or relevant, make sure you get your medical stuff turned/sent. "There wasn't a huge push to educate us at least in the classroom that I was part of ... placed on a medical board, I'm now a claim and a disability claim, which, as we all know, is a long and hyperbolic. Whether or not you feel you have a current ailment, or disability, or limitation, or not, it's important to it's important to have record of that.
- Found out about VA benefits "I was always aware of VA benefits, I was in separation it was part of my medical out processing"
- Main way of learning about benefits offered by VA: the separation process, then Veteran Service Office Google and VA website

How do Veterans Want E&E?

Application

- Being able to not deal with so many people would reduce frustration
- "My biggest hatred of the VA website is how everything is scattered"
- Prefers not having to deal with a human
- Veteran wants to not have to deal with so many people to successfully enroll in benefits
- Eligibility process - lives handling digitally than deal with a human
- I would rather do it online, as long as the instructions are clear. Sometimes the instructions are really excess
- A more streamlined process would be better than when I applied. Now, I'm hearing people can apply for online and find out if you're eligible for healthcare.
- Prefer "I would have preferred email, it was difficult to leave a screen in two"
- Getting something in the mail is helpful as well, but that's a very inefficient conversation
- Would like it if there was a way to make the process not feel overwhelmed.
- dream process: anti-wits office in an out building close to the hospital. Veterans would be able to address multiple benefit types
- Having VSOs in each VA facility can help veterans navigate the process
- Prefers to communicate phone or email, "in person is very difficult."
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- Prefers options for websites & apps for future benefits eligibility: "Veterans would have saved so many hours" "We spent entire days there"
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- Prefers to communicate phone or email, "in person is very difficult."
- Notification of "you can be eligible for this"
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- Prefers to have a checklist of eligibility requirements: "I'm a paper guy, but I'm learning the computer. But I am never of a paper kind of a guy"
- "I'm old school, but I'm learning more tech every stuff"
- Would call the 800 number to find out eligibility and request personal information
- Wants a regular web form, not a 50 step pdf
- Wants a regular web form, not a 50 step pdf
- Authentication is important, but people on one and go with that"
- Is future would prefer to do application online
- snap fingers, "not so complicated, and bigger"
- Visiting local VA would also be an option
- Would start with VA website, but if it is complicated, or looks like it would be more complex, this would be more crossfire
- If the VA wants people to do it online, they need to make their online access or on their desktop to cut the middle man out and directly file for benefits, rather than having people go to disability and health benefits. ... They have a lot of stuff I mean live chat and everything on their desktop. Someone, or whatever the people who can help and assist and quick response.
- Is future would prefer to do application online
- Makes 1-2 sheets of paper with information, and I'm calling the VA ahead of time to make an appointment so they can start as soon as they get out of service
- Is future would prefer to do application online

General Thoughts

- Need to make sure that people understand what benefits they are eligible for and how to receive them during transition
- "Very still have to trust people to do what they're claiming about stuff" (~local VA center)
- What could have made the process better: "Just a unique know how to navigate the system, and if people actually responded on the initial inquiry"
- Initially, the VA talking to people who are not in the money, not the health issues. They need to make it about getting help with health issues.
- The Veteran wears VA systems to communicate some.
- Dream process: ~upload documents and it automatically sends to services / benefits.
- Notification of "you can be eligible for this"
- "I really thought that initial phase is with the VA was getting in the system."
- Veteran shares it was frustrating to go into the VA and learn there.
- Veteran wants to not have to deal with so many people to successfully enroll in benefits
- Have a "Veteran Navigator" who helps Veterans shares to hard to tell Veterans this all the time
- Veterans in his community seemed to struggle with navigating the system, and he's been helping them to tell Veterans this all the time
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